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Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

Summary

Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 71/177, the present annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children provides an overview of major initiatives and developments to sustain and scale up efforts to safeguard children's freedom from violence, including information on field missions and regional initiatives, and on progress achieved and the challenges remaining to protect children from all forms of violence. The report builds upon the process of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its target to end all forms of violence against children.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report provides a review of key developments promoted by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children at the global, regional and national levels and provides an overview of the results achieved in safeguarding children's freedom from violence.

2. Guided by General Assembly resolution 62/141, which established her mandate, the Special Representative is a global, independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children.

3. In its resolution 71/177, the Assembly expressed support for the work of the Special Representative, recognized the progress achieved since the establishment of her mandate, including through regional and thematic consultations, field missions and studies on emerging concerns, and welcomed her efforts in mainstreaming the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children[1] in the international, regional and national agenda.

4. Realizing every child's right to freedom from violence is a fundamental dimension of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations study on violence against children identified critical steps to make it a reality for all children. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisions a world that invests in children and in which every child grows up free from violence, abuse and exploitation.

5. Capitalizing on the strategic opportunity presented by the 2030 Agenda to further strengthen the protection of children from violence, the Special Representative has promoted and further enhanced strategic processes and alliances with national Governments, United Nations partners, regional organizations, civil society, faith-based organizations, the private sector, the media and child-led networks.

6. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires strengthened partnerships. For this reason, the Special Representative strongly supports the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, Alliance 8.7, the Global Youth Partnership for the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Promoting Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies.

7. With the same aim, the Special Representative in 2016 launched, with a wide range of partners, the "High time to end violence against children" initiative,[2] which mobilizes leaders from all walks of life to take concrete action and widen circles of non-violence around children's lives.

8. Cooperation with faith-based organizations has been critical to enlarge circles of non-violence. Religious leaders are important allies in the promotion of the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children, helping to foster dialogue, promote change in practices that perpetuate violence against children, and encourage the use of non-violent forms of discipline within places of worship and religious communities at large. As Pope Francis highlighted during his meeting with the Special Representative in March, and on Universal Children's Day, the international community needs to be vigilant, to protect children from violence and to ensure that every boy and girl enjoys school and education and grows up with serenity and confidence in the future.

9. The fifth Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children, held in May 2017 in Panama City, placed these concerns at the heart of its agenda. The Forum

[1] See A/61/299.

[2] www.endviolenceagainstchildren.org.

brought together more than 500 leaders and members of the world's faith and spiritual traditions from 70 countries to increase understanding of the scale and impact of violence against children, identify ways religious leaders could help to tackle it, and enhance the commitment of faith communities to prevent violence and ensure the protection of children.

10. The Forum adopted the Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children,[3] which reaffirms the moral imperative to protect children from harm and recognizes that no religious teaching or tradition justifies any form of violence against children.

11. The Declaration expresses strong resolve to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda and a clear commitment to raise awareness and promote action within faith communities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal targets on ending violence against children. It pledges to generate greater social and political will for legislation and policies, and increased funding of programmes for children's protection, and commits to listening to children with respect, educating religious and spiritual leaders and communities about the different forms of violence against children and offering education in positive parenting and ethical values to help families and children develop empathy and become more resilient.

12. In April, cooperation with Buddhist leaders was further enhanced when the Special Representative joined representatives from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam to identify ways of preventing violence, including the online abuse and sexual exploitation of children. Participants identified opportunities for Buddhist leaders to use their authority and influence to raise awareness within their communities; break the silence surrounding violence against children and provide support to victims; and promote effective responses by Governments, including strengthened laws and policies and adequate allocation of resources. They also committed to mobilize Buddhist leaders across Asia to ensure that Buddhist temples and communities were safe spaces for children that could heal and reintegrate victims of violence.

13. Cooperation with the corporate sector also remained a high priority for the Special Representative. The meeting of the Global Child Forum on South America provided a strategic platform to enhance support from business sector allies and to document and share good practices that help strengthen children's protection.

14. The valuable experiences presented during the meeting illustrated how the corporate sector can add its influential voice to global efforts to prevent and address violence against children, using its leverage with peers and partners to support advocacy, policy reforms and mobilization campaigns in favour of children's protection from violence, while mitigating risks associated with products and services that can lead to the abuse and exploitation of children.

15. As the Special Representative stressed to participants in the Forum, it is critical to match commitments by the business sector with practical implementation efforts. This should include having a code of ethics that protects children from violence in all of a company's operations, practices and procedures, supply chains and procurement policies; ensuring sound and transparent monitoring and reporting of compliance, and progress to track, prevent and respond to potential incidents of violence; and training staff and suppliers to widen the circle of protection around children.

[3] http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/2017/Panama%20Declaration%202017.pdf.

II. Supporting implementation of the 2030 Agenda towards the elimination of all forms of violence against children

A. Placing children at the heart of sustainable development

16. The Special Representative remains strongly committed to seizing the unique opportunity presented by implementation of the 2030 Agenda to accelerate progress in the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children. The inclusion in the 2030 Agenda of a distinct target (target 16.2) to end all forms of violence against children is a historic achievement which offers a unique opportunity to galvanize political will and reignite action.

17. Children dream of a world of peace and non-violence, a world in which they can grow up happy, cherished, supported, safe, confident and empowered, and in which no child is left behind. For countless millions of children, however, life is instead a nightmare, as they are exposed to appalling levels of violence in their neighbourhoods, in schools, in institutions for their care and protection, and within the home. Children are too frightened to speak up, uncertain about the support they may receive. In addition, they lack the information they need to seek advice and protection in their healing, recovery and reintegration.

18. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda is giving tremendous impetus to the common endeavour to end violence against children. Many Member States are adopting comprehensive and cohesive nationally owned sustainable development plans towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. These plans need to be supported by predictable resources and informed by solid evidence and robust, reliable and disaggregated data. Progress towards the Goals needs to be periodically reviewed, and it is essential that such national reviews address progress on the violence-related targets.

19. Investing in children is crucial if the targets are to be reached, but there is still a long way to go. While half of those living in extreme poverty are children and half of the world's children are affected by violence each year, budget allocations for these fundamental dimensions of children's well-being are often inadequate. Furthermore, official development assistance mobilized towards ending violence against children remains wholly insufficient. Indeed, as noted in a recent report,[4] the average official development assistance per child and per year to address violence in low-income countries amounts to less than $0.65, or less than 0.6 per cent of total official development assistance.

20. The high-level political forum on sustainable development is key to ensuring that children are placed at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. In 2016, the theme of the first high-level political forum to review the Sustainable Development Goals was "Ensuring that no one is left behind". While the report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals highlighted that "various forms of violence against children are pervasive, including discipline that relies on physical punishment and psychological aggression",[5] few of the voluntary national reviews referred to progress on the targets related to violence against children.

21. In her global advocacy, including through participation in high-level intergovernmental meetings, cooperation with regional organizations, and country

[4] ChildFund Alliance, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages International, World Vision International, and Development Initiatives, "Counting pennies: a review of official development assistance to end violence against children" (2017). Available from http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/2017/counting_pennies_web.pdf.

[5] E/2016/75, paras. 108-110.

missions, the Special Representative seeks to increase attention paid to the opportunity provided by voluntary national reviews and the high-level political forum on sustainable development for States to share positive developments and lessons learned, as well as persistent challenges, and efforts to monitor the situation of children and their exposure to violence.

22. In 2017, the theme of the high-level political forum on sustainable development was eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world, a topic of special relevance to ending violence against children. Violence perpetuates poverty, but poverty can also be a trigger for violence and create the conditions that allow abuse and exploitation to flourish. In marginalized communities where families' incomes are low and livelihood opportunities are few, housing is inadequate and there is limited access to social services of quality, children are more likely to experience violence in their lives. They are also less likely to get support to recover from their trauma; enjoy a future with skills, confidence and resilience; or feel empowered to fight impunity.

23. Poverty and violence are intertwined. Several voluntary national reviews presented valuable examples of how strengthened social protection to address poverty mitigates the increased risk of violence children may face. To highlight these important experiences and the need for coherent cross-sectoral action for prevention and response, the Special Representative co-hosted a side event during the high-level political forum on sustainable development with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Governments of Indonesia and Sweden, with high profile speakers, including the President of Chile, the Minister of National Development Planning of Indonesia, the Minister of Public Administration of Sweden and the Minister for Social Development of Chile.

24. The Ministerial Declaration of the 2017 high-level political forum on sustainable development gave high visibility to the protection of children's rights, including their right to freedom from violence. It stressed the need to invest in children to address multidimensional deprivations and empower them to build a more prosperous future, committed to support children's participation in the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda, and stressed the need to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against them.

25. In 2019, the General Assembly will host its first review of the 2030 Agenda. Devoted to the theme "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality", the session will address Goal 16, including target 16.2, on ending all forms of violence against children. The thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child will also take place in 2019. This presents a unique opportunity to further mobilize global action to achieve a real difference in violence prevention and response by holding a special thematic review at the high-level political forum on sustainable development focusing on children and the violence-related Sustainable Development Goal targets.

26. The 2030 Agenda places great importance on the availability of quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data to inform decision-making and enable the measurement of inclusive progress.

27. In recent years, there have been several significant developments with regard to strengthening data on violence against children: a global indicator framework has been agreed which includes core indicators to measure progress; data collection initiatives on violence continue to be promoted by United Nations agencies; and household surveys specifically on violence against children have helped fill data gaps.

28. At the same time, more work needs to be done. For example, there is no standard categorization of the different forms of violence, and no internationally agreed methodology for data collection. Various approaches are followed, for example, addressing different age groups and types of behaviour, thus compromising the estimation of global prevalence or precise, consistent and representative assessments.

29. Data is not politically neutral; it provides transparency to policymaking and enables public scrutiny of the actions of States with regard to the protection of children from violence. As the surveys conducted around the world illustrate, there are positive examples of Governments that place ensuring the best interests and safety of children above the preservation of a positive political image. These efforts should be commended. Support must be given to ensure strong collaboration between statistical offices and policymakers so that data on children's exposure to violence, no matter how daunting the findings, help to shape the policy agenda.

30. Promoting the development of sound monitoring tools and methodologies, as well as disaggregated data to monitor progress and identify gaps in implementation, is a subject to which the Special Representative will continue to give great attention.

B. Consolidating knowledge to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda

31. Since her previous report, the Special Representative has issued two thematic studies to further raise awareness, consolidate knowledge and mobilize action in areas of concern addressed by the 2030 Agenda.

32. *Ending the Torment: Tackling Bullying from the Schoolyard to the Cyberspace*[6] gathered evidence from leading experts around the world on this major issue of concern for children. The study informed the report of the Secretary-General on protecting children from bullying (A/71/213) and the General Assembly resolution on children's protection from bullying.[7]

33. The study took into account children's views and experiences, as well as the findings from an online poll promoted by UNICEF and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children. More than 100,000 children and young people participated in the survey: 9 out of 10 considered that bullying was a problem, two thirds reported that they had been victims, and one third of these children had told no one about it.

34. Protecting children from bullying is not just an ethical imperative or a laudable aim of public health or social policy; it is a question of human rights. Bullying is an aggressive pattern of behaviour that is often part of a continuum, a torment that shapes children's lives at different moments and in different settings, from the schoolyard to the neighbourhood and, increasingly, into the online world.

35. Indeed, with growing access to the Internet and the wide use of smartphones by children and young people, online bullying (cyberbullying) has become an increasing source of concern. Spreading rumours and posting false information, hurtful messages, embarrassing comments or photos, or being excluded from online networks can affect victims deeply. Anonymity may aggravate cyberbullying by encouraging young people to act in ways they would not in person. Moreover, cyberbullying can strike its victims at any time, and the harmful messages or materials can spread fast and far, multiplying the risks and its damaging impact.

[6] Available from http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/page/1496.

[7] General Assembly resolution 71/176.

36. Bullying severely undermines children's health, emotional well-being and school performance. The psychological and emotional scars that are left may persist into adult life.

37. The study informed important global initiatives, including the organization in Sweden of the first World Anti-Bullying Forum, with the participation of experts, practitioners and academics to broaden the understanding of bullying and promote the use of effective prevention strategies.

38. In January 2017, the Special Representative participated in a major international symposium on "School violence and bullying: from evidence to action", organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Ewha Womans University in Seoul, with the support of the Government of the Republic of Korea. The symposium brought together participants from all regions, including representatives of Governments, United Nations agencies, civil society organizations and academia, as well as young people.

39. During the symposium, *School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report* was launched and a multi-stakeholder platform for data and research established. This platform will gather evidence on the prevalence of bullying and school violence, and on effective interventions to address it, and promote standardized definitions and monitoring methodologies.

40. The commitments made at the symposium are a major boost to mobilizing attention and action on bullying, supporting the implementation of the recommendations in the report of the Secretary-General and advancing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal targets.

41. The second study issued by the Special Representative, *Protecting Children affected by Armed Violence in the Community*,[8] was launched in Quito during the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III).

42. The study noted that armed violence in the community disrupts social harmony and family life, interrupts schooling, compromises health care and undermines economic growth. It generates fear and insecurity, which limit children's ability to move freely, enjoy childhood and develop as empowered citizens. Such violence is thought to affect 300 million children under the age of five and is often associated with gang activities and organized crime.

43. Half of the world's population lives in cities, and children represent half of that population. Increasing urbanization, along with high levels of economic inequality and endemic poverty, make the risk of violence particularly acute. As the study highlights, however, by building safe urban and school spaces for children, by supporting families and engaging with local authorities, and by investing in public safety and access to justice, violence in the community can be prevented and risks reduced.

44. The development of the study drew on the experience of local authorities and provided a strategic opportunity to mobilize mayors for the promotion of a safe urban environment for children.

45. The study was informed by the views and experiences of children, who also participated in its launch. Young people from the Regional Network of Children and Adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean contributed to the preparation of

[8] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.16.I.15.

"The cities of our dreams",[9] a child-friendly version of the New Urban Agenda.[10] The publication calls for the creation of happy urban spaces where children are safe and protected from violence, enjoy their rights and feel included, and where their voices are taken into account.

C. Honouring the pledge to leave no child behind: children on the move

46. The past few years have witnessed growing numbers of children on the move, alone or with their families, within and across countries. Every minute, 20 people are forced to flee their homes as a result of violence, persecution or conflict. In 2016, children constituted more than half of the total refugee population, and more than 75,000 asylum claims were lodged by unaccompanied or separated children.

47. More often than not, a child's decision to leave home is an escape strategy to secure safety and protection and in the hope of reaching a safe haven from violence and exploitation, political instability, conflict and natural disasters. For children on the move, violence infuses daily life, fear and insecurity is widespread and impunity prevails.

48. Children on the move may witness horrific scenes: the killing of their parents, the rape of their sisters or the forced disappearance of friends. They are exposed to street crime and community violence, systematic extortion and harassment by gang members within their school or neighbourhood. In some cases, children are manipulated by elements of organized crime and forced to take part in criminal activity, including by acting as lookouts in places where drugs or arms are trafficked or where smugglers congregate. If children refuse to cooperate, they may pay a heavy price. Marginalized children in such communities are locked into a vicious cycle of exclusion, stigmatization and violence, as they come to be perceived as criminals themselves, feared by members of their communities and at times treated as criminals by the authorities.

49. Surrounded by such a devastating reality, children feel ready to embark on a perilous journey of uncertainty in the hope of finding a place of safety.

50. These children frequently fail to benefit from the protection to which they are entitled. They can be perceived as interlopers rather than vulnerable victims at risk. They may lack proper documentation or not speak the local language. For the most part, they are simply too frightened to report incidents of abuse or to speak about the trauma they have endured. They do not seek help out of fear that it may have a negative impact on pending decisions regarding their status, or that it may expose them to arrest or deportation.

51. Many children end up in crowded facilities, often together with adults who are not family members. They may find themselves in places with fast-track proceedings, and face a high risk of fast-return proceedings in which their best interests are hardly considered, along with an increased chance that they will be returned to the situations from which they have fled.

52. The threat of deprivation of liberty is high. Children may be detained allegedly to secure their protection from the risk of disappearance or trafficking, for the purpose of family tracing or in order to consider the options for return to their

[9] Dora Bardales, "The cities of our dreams: a safe and child friendly New Urban Agenda" (September 2016). Available from http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/documents/docs/thecityofourdreams_ENG.pdf.

[10] http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English-With-Index-1.pdf.

countries of origin. Detaining these children, which is never in their best interest, is an additional punishment, the purported aims of which can be achieved in a different way.

53. While their fate is being decided, children may endure humiliation, physical attacks and sexual abuse. In many cases, they lack access to a child protection authority, an age- and gender-sensitive protection determination process, legal representation and accessible information about their rights or about ways of seeking redress for the acts of violence they may have suffered.

54. Time and time again, children on the move experience fear, anxiety, panic, depression, sleep disorders, mental health problems, an increased risk of self-harm and an aggravated sense of hopelessness, which have a severe impact on their development and well-being.

55. These children have been left very far behind. For them, the vision of the 2030 Agenda seems distant and illusory. It is urgent to transform the continuum of violence that shapes their life into a continuum of protection of their rights.

56. That was the main concern addressed by the expert consultation organized in Mexico in June 2017 by the Special Representative and the Universidad Iberoamericana, in cooperation with United Nations partners, academia, civil society and community-based organizations.

57. Participants in the consultation focused in particular on ways of safeguarding the best interests of children on the move. This must be a primary consideration in all decisions affecting the child, including upon arrival in a transit or destination country, in identification and registration procedures and during relevant proceedings in which the child's views need to be taken into account, and when the possibility of return is envisaged or the deportation of a family member is considered.

58. Children should also be informed about their rights and legal safeguards at all stages, have access to child-friendly information and counselling and be genuinely consulted about decisions affecting them, including when seeking redress for incidents of violence.

59. Protecting the best interests of the child is critical to a safe age assessment procedure that is child- and gender-sensitive, as well as culturally sensitive. Such procedures should be conducted only when there is a well-founded doubt about the age of the child. They should be conducted by a multidisciplinary team of well-trained professionals with respect for the dignity of the child and consideration of the trauma that may have already been endured. In cases of doubt about their age, children should benefit from the special protection to which they are entitled.

60. Safeguarding the best interests of the child becomes particularly important with unaccompanied or separated children. It is essential that a guardian be appointed promptly to uphold their best interests at all times. As noted in the expert consultation, the best interests of the child can be undermined by lengthy procedures, inadequate vetting to ensure the identification of qualified guardians, and a lack of clear, harmonized standards on their roles and responsibilities. They are further undermined when guardians are responsible for large numbers of children. The lack of an effective monitoring system and of safe complaint procedures has compromised the identification of incidents of abuse and exploitation of children, and prompt and effective responses.

61. Children are entitled to grow up in a caring and nurturing family environment that ensures their care, development and well-being. When children are forced to flee their countries in search of safety and protection, preserving a family

environment becomes particularly important. Respect for family unity and special protection in the event of separation were strong recommendations from the consultation when children travel with their family, and with regard to ensuring that any request for family reunification is considered in a positive, humane and expeditious manner, as required by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this area, important legislative developments in Latin America were acknowledged. Several countries in that region have formally recognized the protection of family life for all migrants, including children, and in some cases a humanitarian visa or resident permit may be issued for the purpose of family reunification.

62. As highlighted by the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants,[11] the responsibility for the care of children on the move needs to be promptly entrusted to national child protection authorities rather than left to border or security officials. To be effective, child protection systems dealing with children on the move need to be cohesive and well resourced, with quality services and well-trained staff having the skills to meaningfully interview and communicate with children, understand and address risks and promote resilience. This needs to be supported by effective inter-agency collaboration among all relevant government departments, as well as by cross-border and regional cooperation, to promote durable solutions and a continuity of care while preventing the risk of children being revictimized.

63. Independent national children's rights institutions play a critical role in monitoring children's protection, providing confidential counselling, reporting incidents of violence and taking action to fight impunity. One important concern these institutions have voiced has been the detention of migrant and asylum-seeking children, who are at times locked up in overcrowded facilities with unrelated adults. This increases the risk of harassment and abuse, while failing to give due consideration to children's best interests and to non-custodial alternatives, including family-based care solutions.

64. Consolidating data and evidence on the situation of children on the move is essential to inform decisions on violence prevention and response. Listening to children's voices is also essential.

65. As a contribution to this effort, the Office of the Special Representative and UNICEF conducted an online opinion survey to capture the views of young people about children on the move. Violence was identified as a serious concern. According to preliminary findings in Latin America, 36 per cent of those surveyed believed that violence was the main cause of children fleeing their country; over half of those who responded considered that violence, abuse and exploitation were the hardest challenges faced, while 24 per cent listed sexual violence as the top concern. When questioned about what Governments should do, half of those surveyed said that the living conditions in countries of origin should be improved; 19 per cent of those surveyed indicated that children should be allowed to stay in the country of destination; and only 3 per cent identified deportation as an appropriate measure.

66. Children's freedom from violence is an ethical and a legal imperative that cannot be met with complacency. With international standards serving as a guide, it is crucial to safeguard the rights of all children who fall under the jurisdiction of the state, including asylum-seeking, refugee, migrant and stateless children. The development of the global compacts on refugees and migration presents a strategic opportunity to promote the strengthening of child protection institutions, safeguard children's care and safety, promote durable solutions, rapidly identify and address risks, and fight impunity.

[11] General Assembly resolution 71/1.

III. Mainstreaming children's protection from violence in the national policy agenda

67. The Special Representative continued to give strong support to the consolidation of national efforts to protect children from violence, including through country visits to Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, Indonesia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Panama, the Republic of Korea and Thailand. These visits helped to further enhance policy frameworks to prevent and address violence, support the enactment and enforcement of legislation to ban violence in all its forms and promote the consolidation of data and research to inform action, and to sustain and monitor progress.

68. In Indonesia, children's protection from violence is a key priority in the national development plan. The national strategy on the elimination of violence against children plays a critical role in advancing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and is supported by innovative social protection schemes which promote parenting support, help to keep girls in schools and prevent early marriage.

69. In Malawi, the policy response to the 2015 national survey on violence against children helped to place special emphasis on children's protection from harmful practices, including initiation rites and attacks against children with albinism. Similarly, it helped to focus national attention on the high prevalence of child marriage and on the critical importance of keeping girls in school. It also strengthened the involvement of traditional and community leaders whose role has been critical in violence prevention and response, and in monitoring progress. Importantly, these local leaders have enacted by-laws to prohibit child marriage and other harmful practices and support the return to school of children who get married. Important results are being achieved, including an increase in the number of incidents reported, a growing number of girls back in school, and local chiefs no longer officiating at child marriages and invalidating those which were previously celebrated.

70. In 2017, the United Republic of Tanzania launched a new national plan of action to end violence against women and children.[12] Guided by the 2030 Agenda and building upon the findings of the 2009 household survey on violence against children conducted by the Government, the plan recognizes the positive impact of investment in violence prevention on inclusive growth and provides a strategic framework to mobilize action and resources towards the achievement of the violence-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goal, especially target 16.2.

71. In France, a new interministerial action plan to combat violence against children for the period 2017-2019[13] was adopted in 2017. The plan is aimed at supporting families in their child-rearing responsibilities and promoting positive parenting practices, breaking the invisibility of violence against children, promoting early detection and reporting of incidents, and strengthening support services and assisting victims.

72. Support for legislative measures to address violence against children remained a high priority for the Special Representative. Since 2006, the number of countries with a comprehensive legal ban has more than tripled, reaching more than 50 in 2017, including most recently Benin, Ireland, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lithuania, Mongolia, Paraguay, Peru, Slovenia and Viet Nam.

[12] http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/2016/NPA-VAWC%20%20Tanzania.pdf.

[13] www.memoiretraumatique.org/assets/files/v1/Documents-pdf/2017-1er_Plan_VIOLENCES_ENFANTS_VF.pdf.

73. Significant legislative measures were adopted to consolidate the normative foundation of children's protection from violence and address specific manifestations of violence. In Sweden, incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into national legislation is being pursued to ensure that the Convention's provisions are fully respected in all decisions affecting children.

74. In Malaysia, the passing of the Sexual Offences against Children Bill 2017 strengthened the protection of children from sexual abuse and exploitation. The bill criminalizes the grooming of children, promotes their protection from online abuse and recognizes them as competent witnesses in sexual crime cases.

75. Chile adopted a new law that criminalizes the physical or psychological maltreatment of children or of any person with disabilities. The law increases penalties and introduces new sanctions, including barring offenders from employment in the education or health sectors or other positions that may involve a direct relationship with a victim.

76. Brazil adopted important new legislation to safeguard the rights of child victims and witnesses of violence. The legislation requires the federal, state and local governments to develop comprehensive and coordinated policies to secure children's right to freedom from violence in all settings, including the home and family. The law recognizes the rights of children to the following: access to information and legal representation, participation in decisions that affect them, the ability to benefit from relevant support services, protection from revictimization, and reparation. It also establishes accessible, safe, confidential and child-friendly reporting, counselling and complaint mechanisms for child victims and witnesses of violence, recognizing their right to be listened to by well-trained professionals and in a child-friendly environment. Importantly, it recognizes the duty of any person who witnesses or knows of any act of physical, psychological or sexual violence committed against a child in a private or local setting to immediately report such violence to the competent authorities, who should then bring it to the attention of the public prosecutor.

77. Important efforts continued to be promoted to consolidate national data systems on children's exposure to violence through national household surveys in Asia and Africa, including in Cambodia, Kenya, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malawi, Nigeria, the Philippines and Zimbabwe. In 2017, an important national survey was conducted in Mexico, and similar initiatives are under preparation in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

78. These surveys have helped to bring to light the hidden reality of violence in children's lives and to shape evidence-based national plans of action to address priority concerns. This has been critical to promoting better cross-sectoral coordination at different levels of administration and involving a wide range of stakeholders, including academia, civil society, religious leaders and the private sector, as well as children themselves.

79. In some cases, surveys have given greater visibility to pressing areas of concern and led to further research. In the Philippines, for example, a national baseline study on violence against children helped to raise awareness and promote violence-prevention efforts; encourage reporting and enhance the capacity of service-providers; and support legislation, policies and programmes for children. The study emphasized the need to gather gender-disaggregated data to assess the different risks of sexual abuse faced by boys and girls, and to help inform gender-sensitive advocacy, prevention and response strategies, and the provision of appropriate services to victims.

80. The study in the Philippines showed a high incidence of violence in the home and revealed the serious risk of children's exposure to online abuse, with nearly half of children experiencing sexual violence or cyberbullying. To address this serious concern, a follow-up study was conducted on online abuse.

81. Despite strong legislation protecting children from online sexual exploitation, webcam livestreaming of the sexual abuse of children is happening, and at times involves family members. According to the findings of the follow-up study, 8 in 10 children and adolescents are in danger of becoming victims of online abuse, while 5 in 10 think friends participate in risky behaviour while using the Internet. This situation in the Philippines has been facilitated by several factors, including increased access to the Internet and to cheap devices, which makes it possible for people in poor communities to access cyberspace; widespread knowledge of English, which eases communication for perpetrators abroad; a convenient mechanism for payment through the network of remittance services across the country; and a culture of silence and deference to elders. Moreover, the low legal age of sexual consent (12 years of age) makes impunity hard to fight.

IV. Reinforcing regional processes to enhance the protection of children from violence

82. Cooperation with regional organizations and institutions has been a cornerstone of the Special Representative's strategy to accelerate progress in protecting children from violence. Regional organizations and institutions are strategic allies, and their cooperation with the Special Representative has helped place violence against children at the centre of the regional policy agenda, while enhancing the accountability of States and supporting national implementation efforts.

83. The Special Representative has hosted with regional partners high-level consultations in the Central and South American, Caribbean, South Asian, Pacific, European and Arab regions. Six regional monitoring reports have been issued and periodic review meetings have been held to sustain and accelerate progress.

84. As a result, regional political commitments and implementation road maps have been adopted,[14] and a new generation of regional action plans on violence against children is being developed in line with the 2030 Agenda. In turn, these efforts have translated into the strengthening of national legislation and public policies, the consolidation of data and research, and the promotion of campaigns to mobilize support.

85. To further promote this process, the Special Representative organizes an annual high-level cross-regional round table with regional organizations and institutions. This forum has become a strategic mechanism within the United Nations to engage in policy dialogue, share knowledge and good practices, promote cross-fertilization of experiences, enhance synergies, identify trends and pressing challenges, and join forces to strengthen children's safety and protection.

86. In June 2017 in Manila, the Special Representative co-hosted, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the seventh annual cross-regional round table for advancing the protection of children from violence. Devoted to placing children at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 2017 meeting addressed the role of regional organizations in

[14] http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/documents/docs/A-HRC-19-64_EN_2.pdf.

accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal targets on children's protection from violence.

87. Guided by the theme of the 2017 high-level political forum on sustainable development, the meeting provided a valuable platform to share regional experiences and good practices to address the multifaceted nature of deprivation and violence against children, including by promoting access to universal, inclusive and child-sensitive basic social services of quality. Of particular importance are initiatives in different regions, including the Baltic Sea States; cross-sectoral cooperation and integrated services to prevent violence; investment in early childhood care; the ensuring of effective family support and social protection measures; and promotion the social inclusion of those left behind.

88. Representatives from regional organizations reaffirmed their commitment to use the opportunity provided by the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the development of voluntary national reviews to accelerate progress towards the elimination of all forms of violence against children. They highlighted the importance of mobilizing adequate national resources and official development assistance to support violence prevention and response initiatives, as well as of strengthening data systems to inform decisions and monitor and sustain progress.

89. Moreover, participants recognized the critical role of children as agents of change and the importance of undertaking action informed by children's views and experiences. In this spirit, an ASEAN children's forum was held alongside the meeting, creating an opportunity for a strategic engagement with young people from the ASEAN region. The children's forum discussions placed a special emphasis on children's empowerment and participation to prevent and address incidents of violence, and on risks associated with bullying and online abuse.

90. The young participants at the Forum stressed the importance of enjoying a loving and supportive environment and called for awareness-raising and information-sharing initiatives so that they could become empowered citizens, identify risks, report incidents and seek help from child-sensitive services. They recognized the need for urgent government action, including effective laws, policies and budgets, as well as good parenting and early childhood initiatives, training for professionals working with children, and genuine opportunities and platforms for open discussions with young people. As children highlighted: "Everyone has a role to play and, if we are willing to end violence against children, we can make the world a better place!"

91. In 2018, the Special Representative will co-host the cross-regional meeting with the South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children. Significant developments continue to be pursued in South Asia to further strengthen children's protection from violence, while special emphasis is being placed on advancing implementation of the regional plan of action for the prevention and elimination of child labour for the period 2016-2021 and developing a regional strategy to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation.

92. The vision of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want[15] and Africa's Agenda for Children 2040,[16] which was adopted by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 2016, are aligned with the 2030 Agenda. Africa's Agenda for Children 2040 includes a dedicated goal of protecting every child

[15] https://au.int/en/Agenda2063/popular_version.

[16] www.acerwc.org/download/africas-agenda-for-children-rights-2040-english_version/?wpdmdl=9752.

against violence, exploitation, neglect and abuse by 2040[17] and mainstreams the prevention and elimination of violence against children in other areas.

93. The 2017 Day of the African Child[18] was devoted to the 2030 Agenda and to efforts made in the region to promote sustainable development. Recognizing violence as one of the major barriers to creating an Africa fit for children, the discussions placed a special emphasis on ensuring progress towards Sustainable Development Goal target 16.2.

94. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is developing a strategic framework on the strengthening of child protection systems to prevent and respond to violence against, and abuse and exploitation of, children. The framework is aimed at providing guidance to strengthen national child protection systems across the region, reducing child vulnerability, building children's resilience, and preventing and protecting children from abuse, exploitation and violence, as well as enhancing the accountability of ECOWAS in monitoring, implementation and reporting in West Africa.

95. The Special Representative will continue to enhance her collaboration with the African Union, including in support of efforts to advance the implementation of its Campaign to End Child Marriage.

96. In June 2017, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union devoted an open session to ending child marriage in Africa.[19] The Council underlined the need for member States to criminalize child marriage, with a view to deterring it, while ensuring the provision of appropriate mechanisms for psychosocial support, as well as reproductive health services for victims of violence. The Council requested the African Union Commission to take the steps necessary to raise awareness and enhance civic education campaigns on ending all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation of children, including child marriage, echoing the call made by the Special Representative and many partners during the seventh International Policy Conference on the African Child,[20] hosted by the African Child Policy Forum in November 2016.

97. Since the adoption in 2015 of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children, the Special Representative has been actively promoting its implementation, in collaboration with the ASEAN secretariat, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children, and member States.

98. The regional plan is framed by the 2030 Agenda and provides a powerful example of how regional cooperation can support national action to protect children from violence and advance progress to achieve the violence-related Sustainable Development Goal targets. It proposes concrete actions within a realistic time frame, including the promotion of non-violent approaches to child discipline, the deinstitutionalization of children, the protection of children from online abuse, the promotion of child-friendly justice proceedings, the prevention of deprivation of liberty of children, the promotion of alternatives to detention, and awareness-raising campaigns to break the invisibility of violence and secure the protection of child victims.

99. To support implementation of the Regional Plan, in December 2016, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children released the ASEAN Guidelines for a Non-violent Approach to Nurture,

[17] Aspiration 7: Every child is protected against violence, exploitation, neglect and abuse.
[18] www.acerwc.org/download/concept-note-day-of-the-african-child-2017/?wpdmdl=9987.
[19] www.peaceau.org/uploads/psc.692.press-statement.ending.child.marriage.13.06.2017.pdf.
[20] http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/story/2016-11-15_1507.

Care and Development of Children in All Settings.[21] Recognizing the importance of sound legislation and evidence, and of investment in prevention and protection measures tailored to the national reality, the Guidelines promote children's development and well-being and the elimination of violence in all settings. They also address violence among children, such as the risk of bullying; physical, verbal and sexual abuse; and online abuse.

100. In Latin America, an inter-American forum on national child protection systems was held in April 2017, with the participation of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and representatives from Governments and civil society. The Forum recognized the important developments promoted in the region to ensure a comprehensive system of protection of children from violence and discrimination, and highlighted the persisting challenges that compromise the rights of vulnerable groups, including indigenous children, children in the early years of childhood, those with disabilities and those affected by migration and refugee situations. Acknowledging the need to promote information-sharing and cross-fertilization of experiences between countries in the region, the Forum called for enhanced coordination across all levels of administration, supported by sound policies, institutions and funding; consolidated systems of monitoring and evaluation of public policies; active engagement of local authorities and civil society organizations in implementation efforts; and the creation of formal and permanent platforms to enable the representative participation of children and adolescents in this process.

101. In the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Institute of Public Policies on Human Rights is currently developing regional guidelines for the promotion of positive discipline and the prevention of violence against children. The guidelines will help to advance implementation of regional commitments, including through the enactment and enforcement of laws to ban and prevent all forms of violence against children, and will help to align implementation with the 2030 Agenda.

102. The Special Representative's collaboration with the Council of Europe has continued to be crucial in strengthening children's freedom from violence across the region. The initiatives promoted by the Council of Europe in this area are framed by its Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021), which was developed with the participation of the Special Representative. The Strategy supports national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and is monitored by the Ad Hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child, in which the Special Representative participates. During the first year of the implementation of the Strategy, particular attention was given to the promotion of integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence, the protection of children's rights in the digital environment and the prevention of online abuse, and the rights of migrant and refugee children.

103. In May 2017, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted an action plan on protecting refugee and migrant children in Europe for the period 2017-2019[22] with three main pillars: ensuring access to rights and child-friendly procedures; providing effective protection; and enhancing the integration of arriving children. The implementation of the action plan will complement other important activities undertaken by the Ad Hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child, including the drafting of new standards on legal guardianship and age assessment of migrant and refugee children.

[21] http://asean.org/?static_post=asean-guidelines-non-violent-approach-nurture-care-development-children-settings.

[22] https://edoc.coe.int/en/index.php?controller=get-file&freeid=7362.

104. The Special Representative has continued her engagement with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children, including through her contribution to the debate on the rights of the child held by the OIC Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission in November 2016.

105. The Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission outcome document paid substantial attention to the measures that must be taken by OIC member States to enhance children's protection from violence, in line with their international legal obligations. It addressed the gender dimension of violence against children and incorporated a gender perspective into all policies and actions. It called on member States to promote the elimination of all forms of violence against children as a priority in their national development plans and national reviews in the framework of the 2030 Agenda.

V. Looking ahead

106. Thanks to the mobilization created by the United Nations study on violence against children and the process of implementation of its recommendations, significant progress has been made around the world, and States are now better equipped to prevent, eliminate and respond to violence against children.

107. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda presents a unique opportunity to reinvigorate action. For the very first time, the dignity of children and their right to live free from fear and from violence are a distinct priority on the international development agenda. The inclusion of target 16.2, on ending all forms of violence against children by 2030, is a major breakthrough and provides a unique opportunity to promote a quantum leap in violence prevention and response efforts.

108. The international community must now act to transform this unique momentum into an unstoppable movement.

109. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will help reduce the risk of violence in children's lives and provide effective responses for child victims. Failing to reach the Sustainable Development Goal targets related to violence against children, however, will compromise efforts in these areas and hinder social and economic progress across the whole development agenda.

110. It is crucial to act with a deep sense of urgency. Countless millions of children continue to be exposed to physical, psychological and sexual violence, both online and offline, often in a pervasive, hidden and concealed manner. They are intentionally targeted in politically driven processes, manipulated in organized crime, forced to flee violence in their communities, sold and exploited for economic gain, groomed online, disciplined through violent means, sexually assaulted in the privacy of their homes, neglected in institutions, abused in detention centres, bullied in schools, and stigmatized and ill-treated as a result of superstition or harmful practices.

111. Violence compromises all children's rights. In early childhood, the impact of violence is often irreversible. As children grow, their exposure to violence becomes part of a continuum, spreading across their lives and at times persisting across generations. In addition, violence is also associated with far-reaching costs for society. It diverts billions of dollars from social spending, slowing economic development and eroding the human and social capital of States.

112. The 2030 Agenda is designed to bring an end to this situation. It pledges to leave no child behind. The best way to avoid leaving children behind is by putting

them first. A society that fails to do so risks arriving last in the quest for sustainable peace, justice and progress.

113. It is high time to close the gap between international standards, political commitments and action. It is high time to promote a culture of respect for children's rights and of zero tolerance for violence.

114. In the countdown to 2030, everybody counts and everybody is needed, and children want to see positive change in every nation.

115. In the journey to end violence against children, the Special Representative remains deeply committed to mobilizing people from all walks of life. Visionary leaders, child rights defenders, scholars and artists, opinion-makers and young people themselves can be agents of change and inspire others to consolidate circles of non-violence around children's lives.

116. Joining hands together, the sum of all forces will be zero: zero violence. Zero will become humankind's favourite number!